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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001463

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SUBJECT: KING HAMAD OPENS PARLIAMENT WITH PRAISE AND PROMISES

REF: MANAMA 900

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: King Hamad opened the fourth session of parliament on October 1 with praise for the work of both chambers of parliament over the last year, in particular for the chairman and members of the Finance and Economy Committee of the Council of Representatives (COR). The King commended the contributions of the Economic Development Board (EDB), which has advanced progressive economic policies encouraging private sector growth. He also promised progress toward alleviating the problems of unemployment and housing. He barely mentioned foreign policy, making only brief comments about strengthening GCC integration and praising the work of the late Saudi King Fahd. His praise for parliament and its role and responsibilities was likely targeted at boycotters, some of whom have voted in recent days to register with the government under the new political societies law, and are known to be considering participating in the 2006 parliamentary elections. End Summary.

12. (U) King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa addressed a joint session of parliament October 1 to open the fourth session of this first legislative term since the adoption of the 2002 Constitution. Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, in addition to the full cabinet and other notables, were in attendance.

Unusual Praise for Parliamentarians

13. (C) King Hamad was generous in his praise for parliament and for specific parliamentarians, saying, "we pay tribute to the President of the Consultative Council (Shura) and the Speaker of the Council of Representatives and to all the honorable members, and in particular the chairman of the Finance and Economy Committee in the Council of Representatives and the members of the Committee," for their work on oversight of the government budget (reftel). (Note: Committee chair Jihad Bukamal told the Ambassador he was honored to have been singled out in this way.) The King also promoted the concept of full participation in the political system, referring to "comprehensive reform to renew democratic life in the country" and "constructive political participation in the march of national action." King Hamad lauded the work of the parliament, which has made "the will of the people the source of laws it enacts and decisions it makes."

14. (C) The King encouraged parliament to expand its oversight and accountability responsibilities. He said that parliament "has undertaken its constitutional responsibilities and powers in overseeing government performance," and described parliament as "the source of laws, oversight and legitimate accountability, and the house of liberty and national unity." First Deputy Chairman of the Shura Council Abdulrahman Jamsheer told us that the King's speech sends the message to parliament to tighten its control on government expenditure and to root out corruption where it is found. COR member Jassim Abdul A'al considers the King's speech to be encouragement to continue questioning ministers on their policies.

15. (C) Turning to the EDB, headed by the Crown Prince, the King said, "the Board has undertaken the task of advancing economic policies that aim to bring about the participation of the private sector and honorable citizens in shouldering the responsibility, while the State coordinates and regulates the process." Since assuming the chair of the Board in the spring, Shaikh Mohammed Bin Essa Al Khalifa has taken an active leadership position on economic affairs. The EDB has recently taken on a much higher profile in promoting economic reform, and has poached some of the most active and effective government officials from various ministries to work at the EDB. COR member Abdul Aziz Al-Mousa told us he was optimistic that the King's speech would boost business confidence by supporting the industrial sector of the economy.

Reaching Out to the Disenchanted

16. (U) The King devoted a major portion of the speech to social affairs. Unemployment and housing have been hot issues in recent months, given attention by oppositionists and parliamentarians. He said, "all preparations to implement the national employment plan have been completed. The plan underlines the State's determination to provide suitable work opportunities to all job seekers." He also mentioned the possibility of exploring the creation of a system of unemployment insurance, which does not currently exist in Bahrain. Since the King's speech the government has announced a public awareness campaign beginning this month declaring the opening of 20 registration centers throughout Bahrain for all those looking for work. This is a further step in the government's \$83 million training/employment program.

17. (U) On housing, the King expressed optimism while simultaneously recognizing that more needs to be done, saying there has been an "improvement in the standard of services provided to citizens, particularly housing services - and action is being taken to double those housing services in the coming stage."

Foreign Affairs

18. (U) The King had little to say on foreign affairs. He mentioned the importance of the GCC to the Arab nation and his commitment to strengthening integration among GCC countries. He expressed condolences to Saudi Arabia for the loss of King Fahd, a founder of the GCC. He expressed hope for continued stability and continuity under the late king's brother, King Abdullah.

"Work from the Inside"

19. (C) COR member Jassim Abdul A'al told Emboff that the King's comments were a message to those outside the political system (the boycotters) that the parliament is a worthy institution whose importance in Bahraini political life is growing. Shura Council member Abdul Rahman Jawahery agreed, telling us that the King was stressing to the opposition that change is indeed happening within the system, even pressure for the removal of ineffective ministers from their posts. Jawahery said that the King's message to the opposition is that it is counterproductive to remain outside the system and to attempt to effect change through illegitimate means.

Comment

10. (C) The King's lavish praise for parliament, and in particular for COR Finance and Economic Committee chair Jehad Bukamal, signals to the Bahraini public his desire for the legislative branch to beef up its government oversight activities. The King's comments also serve to promote the legitimacy of parliament at a time when the leading boycotting societies, Shia opposition society Al Wifaq and the secular National Democratic Action Society (NDAS), both voted October 6 to register with the government under the new political societies law and thereby set the stage for their possible participation in parliamentary elections. The King's goal is to bring the oppositionists into the system, where they can influence policies from the inside.
MONROE